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Edited by Bruce Baird and Rosemary Candelario

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Bruce Baird, Rosemary Candelario

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Caitlin Coker

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THE DAILY PRACTICE OF HIJIKATA TATSUMI'S APPRENTICES FROM 1969 TO 1978

Caitlin Coker

When attending butoh workshops from 2006 to 2016, I often heard the following phrase: “butoh cannot be taught.” To be more exact, Hijikata Tatsumi’s apprentices Kobayashi Saga and Waguri Yukio both stated this clearly, saying that what they teach are the “seeds” (Kobayashi 2005) or the “text” (Waguri) for butoh. Since butoh cannot be learned by imitating its movement, I wanted to know more about how these butoh teachers developed butoh. This led me to research their time spent with Hijikata.

This chapter claims that their daily lives spent as apprentices under Hijikata fostered the physical philosophy of butoh. It will clarify their daily practice from 1969 to 1978,¹ especially focusing on their collective living and performances at cabarets and clubs, and then present how they understand the connection between that practice and their physical consciousness and performance.

However, this chapter is not the first to note the daily lives of butoh artists around this period. Mikami Kayo, a butoh artist and dance scholar, entered Hijikata’s studio Asbestos-kan² in 1978, when apprentices mainly danced as showgirls at bars. She writes that the first step to approaching butoh was a daily stance; this was completely dropping out of society and devoting everything to butoh, which she calls an “invisible technique” in itself (Mikami 1993, 79–82). Inata Naomi likens this lifestyle to the master-apprentice relationship in traditional Japanese arts. She writes,

Hijikata drove (his apprentices) into a situation where they had to throw away their intention for expression, their identity, and themselves with their lifestyle, his words, and training. Regarding classical dance, such as Japanese performing arts, Noh, and traditional dance, perhaps this (Hijikata’s training style) is related to the method where the apprentice enters the master’s home and, while eating meals together, trains repetitively and extensively, to the point that the apprentice gives up “expression.”

Inata 2008, 452

A major part of their daily lives was performing at cabarets and clubs as show dancers. However, this history is often ignored completely (Mikami 1993), thus disregarding its significance. One exception is Shiga Nobuo’s essay which posits show dance’s “cabaret-ish orgiastic atmosphere and entertainment” as one element of butoh (Shiga 2008, 45). In contrast with past research, this chapter investigates the significance of their daily lives based on interviews and workshops with butoh artists who experienced this period. Specifically, this research was

conducted with six former apprentices (two women and four men) who stayed with Hijikata for periods ranging from three to eight years.³

Apprentices gathering at Asbestos-kan

These artists entered when they were between 19 and 23 years old. At that time, the Tokyo they knew was completely different from what it is today. Kobayashi Saga has often commented on how Shinjuku was much dirtier and full of drifters huffing paint thinner. Murobushi Kō remarked that in the late 1960s with the student demonstrations, classes were cancelled indefinitely, and so he could not go to his university. Yamamoto Moe was commuting to an agricultural college in the 1970s while he was dancing, and he reflected on how there seemed to be less anxiety in those days, that they could get by on what is equivalent to a few hundred dollars a month. Basically, at the same time that it was a turbulent era, it was also a time of economic growth and stability. Many of them seemed to be drifting in the midst of this and wondering what to do with their lives when they encountered and were mesmerized by Hijikata's words and/or his presence on stage or in photographs.

Some of these artists, like Kobayashi, had parents who were accepting of their decisions to live and study at Asbestos-kan, but this was not always the case. Former apprentice Waguri Yukio said that they got many phone calls from parents saying, "Give me back my daughter." Hijikata would counter this by questioning, "Don't you trust your daughter?" Waguri said that his right-wing father begrudgingly accepted his apprenticeship as "being taken by the military and sent off to war," which Hijikata deemed as "wonderful." Perhaps most parents thought that by doing Hijikata's *butoh* these youth were throwing away what society recognizes as a normal life and accepting the lowest social status as a performer.

When the artists decided to train under Hijikata, they almost all began living there immediately. In Yamamoto's case, he was commuting from his own apartment but decided to live in Asbestos-kan to absorb *butoh* more quickly. Sakaino Hiromi was also commuting from her own apartment, but the other apprentices moved her belongings to Asbestos-kan while she was away on a show dance tour. She said that when she returned home to an empty apartment she merely thought, "Oh, okay. Well, I did hear that everyone is living collectively."

Daily life at Asbestos-kan

Bishop Yamada, who lived at Asbestos-kan from 1969 to 1971, explained daily life at that time as having the following physically demanding schedule. They woke up at around 8:30 a.m., trained from 10 a.m., and got ready for working as a show dancer from the afternoon, went to the cabaret or club at 5 p.m., performed two or three times between 8 p.m. and 10 p.m., returned to Asbestos-kan, trained from 1 a.m. to 5 a.m., and then slept from 6 a.m. Waguri admits that it was tough, even masochistic, and Yamada writes that it was so busy that 1 year felt like 10 (Yamada 1992, 128).

Yamamoto remembers this daily life as practicing *butoh* until dawn, sleeping until morning or noon, and then moving independently in the afternoon. He said that he slept during his college classes. Sakaino said that she slept on the floor of the cabaret dressing room, and she remembers all of her waking hours being training.

At the studio, the apprentices slept in two rooms on the second floor of the studio. According to Sakaino, about 10 apprentices slept in a 10 to 14 square meter room. "There were no futons. We all slept like canned sardines on top of the floor. I cannot recall ever sleeping well." Kobayashi elaborated by saying that "there was absolutely no privacy. We were there all day. We

were always there, except for when we performed at the cabaret, and we were not allowed to go out with friends.”

In addition to living and sleeping together, they also cooked and ate meals together. Kobayashi said that the local grocer knew them as Hijikata’s students and often gave them vegetables. In 1969, she wrote in her journal that the rice porridge with leeks was delicious (Kobayashi 2005, 30). Yamamoto remembered eating pancakes with mayonnaise on top, and Sakaino said that she cooked with bread crusts and the parts of vegetable that were normally discarded.

Finally, they cleaned and took care of the studio together. Kobayashi writes how they would clean the studio floors with damp rags (see Figure 42.1). “We would get on all fours and run



Figure 42.1 Cleaning the floor at Asbestos-kan, photograph by Fujimori Hideo. Courtesy of the Hijikata Tatsumi Archive.

from one end of the studio to the other, making a sound like ‘soo soo’ with our rags against the floor. Hijikata, Ashikawa, and I would altogether say ‘soo soo’ while going back and forth.” In parentheses, she writes this very important statement: “As I write this, I cannot help but search for butoh within that movement” (Kobayashi 2005, 31).

Abducted into butoh

Kobayashi spoke about butoh as being inseparable from that daily life. “When I was in Asbestos-kan, I was immersed in butoh all day. The distinction between the usual and the unusual disappeared, and everything completely mixed together. There was even butoh in eating a meal.”

Kobayashi stated that not eating fully was necessary for them to be able to feel their internal organs. The state of having just enough food and barely enough sleep could be seen as the base state for the passive body in butoh, which lends itself to transformation. We can ascertain that having no privacy or freedom took away their sense of self and created an environment where they could focus exclusively on butoh. This stance of becoming fully immersed in butoh was a circumstance that they willingly let themselves be thrown into, by entering the butoh world of the studio.

Yamamoto quoted Hijikata in saying that “the person who is kidnapped will become the most skilled.” Yamamoto then likened this to supposed cases in the traditional Japanese performing arts, where the apprentice is stolen or sold and then trained from a young age. Like these arts, butoh was not something that can be taught or learned, but instead something that the apprentice attained unconsciously through daily life with the master and consciously through trying to “steal” the art by observing that master (see Figure 42.2). Their recollection of this daily life and its circumstances matches with how they reflect on the nature of the body as passive and thus connected to its surroundings.



Figure 42.2 Chatting at Asbestos-kan: Left, Hijikata Tatsumi; right, apprentices, photograph by Yamaguchi Haruhisa. Courtesy of the Hijikata Tatsumi Archive.

Yamada explained this passivity in the following way: "It's not that you move, it's not your will or you 'doing' it. You are being carried onward by something, or being taken away by something. You are moved." Waguri called this one's stance towards movement. He said, "Thinking to do something means that it is already over . . . But I would try to 'do' anyways. Everyone thinks that dancing is 'doing,' right? If I tried to do something, I would be told (by Hijikata), 'Don't do! It's finished.' I often didn't know what to do." Even before moving, it was important for the apprentice to be placed in the space as if waiting to be moved by something else.

Kobayashi stated how a feeling of being abducted and moved was evident to her when she was sent to perform at the cabaret. "Hijikata told me to go to the cabaret . . . I rode the train for a long time and went to far-away places like Hokkaido and Kyushu. During that time, I would get the sensation that my body was being taken away." She reflected on this experience positively, as all of the other interview subjects did, by saying, "I think it was a good thing that I had that sort of sensation."

Yamada and Kobayashi both pointed out how the body itself continues living on despite the individual's will. Their accounts diverged after this. Yamada thought of this living and thus dancing as a constant reception of the outside, whereas Kobayashi said that it springs from the aeon of memory compressed into the material body. If both, then perhaps the encounter of the internal (body) with the external (environment) generates movement along with life.

Show dance by Hijikata's apprentices

All apprentices, both men and women, debuted as show dancers at the cabaret shortly after entering Asbestos-kan (see Figure 42.3). Their performance salary went directly to Hijikata's wife Motofuji Akiko and was then used for the studio, performances, and their livelihoods. Out of that salary, which ranged from about 10,000 to 20,000 yen (approximately \$95 to \$191), the apprentices received 500 yen (about \$4.80).



Figure 42.3 Rehearsal for the "avant-garde show." Kobayashi Saga (back left), Ashikawa Yoko (front left), Hijikata Tatsumi (front right), Tamano Kōichi (back right), photograph by Nakatani Tadao. Courtesy of Nakatani Tadao and the Hijikata Tatsumi Archive, Keio University Art Center.

While some did joke that they were being “exploited,” this paper’s research subjects did not complain or reflect back on this fact negatively. First of all, Murobushi and Sakaino stated that there is a long history of modern dancers and also actors dancing in cabarets to make a living and fund their performances. Also, Waguri said that it was good, because they didn’t have to think about money and could completely focus on butoh. At the same time, Kobayashi stated that one reason that other apprentices did quit was because they didn’t like baring their bodies or shaking their hips in front of people in the countryside.

These apprentices performed in a wide variety of acts and venues. The venues ranged from small clubs to large theaters that could seat 500 to 600 people, with locations in Tokyo and far-away rural areas. Some of these shows were marketed as avant-garde and had strong elements of butoh, while others were standard shows or strip acts.

For example, after Kobayashi entered Asbestos-kan in 1969, she soon performed an “avant-garde show” weekly at the upper-class members-only club Space Capsule for about one year (see Figure 42.4). This show featured motifs from butoh. For example, there were dances where the women were on all fours, wearing chastity belts and with their hair teased up. The men wore phalluses, danced with large brass panels, and used costumes or movements inspired by Nijinsky in “Afternoon of a Faun.” After this, Kobayashi and Ashikawa also starred in shows at a small theater called Shinjuku Art Village in a shady part of Shinjuku. Yamada commented that “Hijikata choreographed it, and they danced it just as they were told, so no one really thought whether it was butoh or whether it was a show. For everyone those were the same thing.”

Waguri’s account of his debut in 1972 was a bit different. He said that 10 days after he entered Asbestos-kan as an apprentice, he was sent as a show dancer to a strip club called France-za. Hijikata taught him a few movements, but he was overall told to “think for himself.” France-za was a well-known, prestigious strip club, but in the 1970s the number of audience members became



Figure 42.4 Kobayashi saga and props for the Space Capsule Show, photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Hijikata Tatsumi Archive.

fewer and fewer. Overall, strip clubs and cabarets in the 1970s experienced a decline, with the economic repercussions of the 1973 oil crisis and the advent of new entertainment like television and color movies diverting the audience's attention (Fukutomi 1994; Hashimoto 1995). Waguri described what happened after this decline in the following way:

That era became more and more materialistic, more radical, erotic, perhaps even more obscene, and no one cared about strip or dance anymore. Sometimes actually having sex with the girl (on stage) . . . making the female (performer) completely nude from the start. The era where they showed the art of the strip tease completely came to an end.

Training through show dance

It is undeniable that these *butoh* artists polished their physical and stage skills through show dance, which then served to develop *butoh*. Regarding the physicality she gained through the cabaret, Kobayashi said, "it really trained us, because we were dancing everyday." Waguri went further and stated, "The cabaret is what actually made me what I am today. I think it was probably what I experienced at that time." Sakaino made a similar comment by saying that "the person I am now is here because of (*butoh*) performances and (cabaret) shows." Sakaino also said that she is glad that she could experience the hardships of practice and the joys of the cabaret, and that she feels sorry for young *butoh* artists who cannot live that lifestyle because of the cabaret's demise.

On the other hand, some *butoh* artists like Yamamoto do not necessarily feel a connection between the cabaret and *butoh*. However, many *butoh* dancers would disagree fervently if the cabaret were framed as merely a place of fundraising.⁴

Communities in the studio and the cabaret

Butoh is often depicted as mainly focusing on the individual's material body, but the dancing communities of Asbestos-kan and the cabaret were also pivotal in its development. Waguri nostalgically referred to both as a "dance village," their own comfortable space separated from society.

Along with providing them with a place to belong, having a community of apprentices allowed them more opportunities to develop movement. In their workshops, Waguri, Kobayashi, and Yamamoto all focus on what one can see and learn in watching others dancing. Hijikata's apprentices took notes based not only on what he said but also on how others were dancing it. Waguri said,

When Hijikata was training us, there were about 30 people . . . And we were separated (by gender). . . . While we took notes, we had to watch the others. If I took notes and was not watching, he would get really angry. We're in a divided state. So, we are writing our own movements while watching another person's dance.

He described this "divided state" in Hijikata as Hijikata being "in" the person dancing simultaneously as he is directing them (Workshop 2015/8/25).

Furthermore, although Yamamoto received a lot of choreography directly from Hijikata, he also has taught the choreography that he saw Hijikata give to a fellow apprentice, Nakajima Natsu (Workshop 2014/5/2). Also, in workshops teaching how to dance artist Hans Bellmer's dolls, Kobayashi praised the diversity in how each participant danced this doll, suggesting that there is something new to learn from each dancing body (Workshop 2014/5/13).

These artists were also members of a dance community based in the cabaret dressing room. Waguri and Sakaino reminisced about how the show dancers showed concern for

them, asking if they could properly eat or sleep due to their demanding schedule. Kobayashi reflected on this relationship further and stated that there was a connection based on a shared social status.

Everyone puts on their makeup, goes out onstage naked, and then comes back (to the dressing room) naked. Our relationships were straight and honest. I was taught something really big here. Things that I remembered with my body, a warm heart . . . Show dancers are people in the lowest social status. When you go that far, there is nothing to hide from each other.

Conclusion

This chapter clarified the daily practice of Hijikata's apprentices and postulated that significance based on the statements of the apprentices themselves. It seems that the movement that sprang from their body was not solely Hijikata pulling at their puppet strings but was generated from these daily experiences, based on communities in dance and social deviancy, as well as collectivity in living and working. Through these experiences, they gained not only stage and dance skills but also developed their philosophies about living as a human being and as a physical body.

Notes

- 1 Mikami references Goda Nario when she classifies Hijikata's Butoh into three periods (Mikami 1993, 54). What Mikami calls the "middle period," from 1969 to 1978, was when Hijikata worked the most closely with his apprentices creating numerous performances. This period is arguably when the movements of "butoh" were developed the most through a series of performances.
- 2 Hijikata's studio was named "Asbestos" because Motofuji's father, who gave the studio to Motofuji Akiko in 1952, worked in the Asbestos industry (Motofuji 1990; Keio University Art Center 2004, 191).
- 3 Research Subjects

Artist	Year of Birth	Gender	Apprenticeship Period
Kobayashi Saga	1946	F	1969–1975
Bishop Yamada	1948	M	1969–1971
Murobushi Ko	1947	M	1969–1971
Waguri Yukio	1952	M	1972–1980
Sakaino Hiromi	"It's a secret"	F	1974–1978
Yamamoto Moe	1953	M	1974–1977

- 4 Murobushi, in particular, critiqued an earlier Japanese version of this paper as shallow because it was limited to a generation of dancers (including Murobushi) who didn't know the post-war cabaret as Hijikata did. Below is an excerpt from an e-mail from Murobushi to the author.

What I am intrigued by the most is not the post-1968 Asbestos-kan of which she (the author) writes, but instead a comparison and verification of the 'Yami (darkness)' during and before the war with the darkness of before then (1969). I most want to read about what kind of 'stage,' . . . the Japanese cabaret offered. Then, we can start talking about Hijikata's 'Ankoku (darkness)' 'Yami (darkness),' 'Yami no ichiba (black market) . . .' and also about the American military base.

Correspondence on March 13, 2015.

This research is based on the actual physical experience and recollections of its subjects, and thus this grounded approach cannot touch on the history that Murobushi indicated. Murobushi pointed to a deeper connection between butoh and the cabaret that has yet to be written.

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